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Mizelle, Hodges
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"Experience Counts"

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12-16-07
Workshop

Mizelle, Hodges & Associates, Inc.

The firm, organized in 1980 by long term former employees of the Insurance Services Office, Inc. (ISO), has its principal office in Atlanta. James T. Wooters, a long time ISO employer, Frank Hodges PhD and J. C. Robertson conduct surveys and are assisted by associates John Lee Cook, Jr. located in Virginia and Jerry Knight located in Florida. The associates have had long leadership careers in the fire service. From time to time other specialists assist with specific projects when their expertise is needed.

Since its inception Mizelle, Hodges & Associates, Inc. has provided a comprehensive range of consultation services to more than 100 agencies. Services generally focus on community and agency analysis and specifically with assisting jurisdictions to improve their fire service, water supply and communications systems and ultimately to improve their ISO classifications. An additional range of services includes evaluating emergency management and EMS programs and developing master and strategic plans for fire protection and emergency medical services.

The firm has done work in a number of states, including Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Missouri, New York and South Carolina. Clients include the Georgia cities of Cartersville, Columbus, Kingsland, Moultrie and Savannah; and counties of Henry, Newton, Rockdale, Walton and Union. Work in Florida has included the cities of Gainesville, Lakeland, Orlando, and Springfield as well as Escambia, Guchrist and Levy counties. We have provided services to a number of jurisdictions in Palm Beach County and to the John F. Kennedy Space Center.

Our Expertise and Experience Includes:

- Application of the ISO grading schedule
- Organizational Analysis
- Community fire protection and emergency medical system analysis
- Master Planning
Long range planning including all elements in community offering fire protection, EMS and homeland security
- Strategic Planning
Analysis of present capabilities and needed changes
- Building and fire prevention code applications, fire and life safety education, arson suppression methods
- Communications systems
- Rural water supply and delivery system for fire protection-tanker shuttle
- Apparatus pump testing
- Apparatus replacement schedule analysis
- Analysis of staffing requirements
- Evaluation of existing fire and EMS facilities with respect to distribution and concentration, recognizing community standards, performance measurements, response times and distances
- ISO requirements for Needed Fire Flows

et target hazard and special-use areas. The firm uses computer mapping programs to determine optimum fire and EMS facility locations.

- Evaluation of existing training programs and facilities, including drills, company, driver, hazard and officer training.
- Analysis of fire hydrant distribution for key buildings.
- Evaluation of interoperability capabilities of department.
- Evaluation of pre-fire planning surveys.
Pre-fire planning is essential for effective fire suppression and incident control. The value of fire sprinkler systems is emphasized in our surveys.
- Analysis of need for Large Diameter Hose.
- Analysis of the need for automatic and manual aid and its value to the jurisdiction being evaluated.

ISO is Coming, ISO is coming

Oconee County will undergo ISO (Insurance Services Organization) inspections in the near future. This inspection of fire districts and departments will assess capabilities and assign a fire protection rating for your area that will affect your homeowner/business insurance costs for the next decade or more. Most districts should retain their current ratings. Some areas may achieve a better rating and save those homeowners and businesses money. The County and all fire departments are working to ensure that no area in Oconee receives a rating lower than its current status.

ISO, an arm of the insurance industry, applies common criteria to fire departments and districts across the nation. Tougher standards and requirements for protection over the years make it harder for every department to measure up, and costs keep spiraling upward.

ISO ratings categories that range from 1 to 10 drive insurance premiums. Ratings criteria include water availability (hydrants, lakes, ponds, streams), distances from water sources and stations, apparatus (engines, tankers, aerials, etc.), water flow volumes, manpower (volunteer and career), location of mutual aid companies, training, protective equipment, generators/lights, communications, etc. All is assessed. Areas with high flow hydrants nearest stations with high volume pumpers and 24/7 firefighters get the highest ratings (Charleston was an ISO 1). Today most Oconee ratings near population centers range from ISO 4 to 7, while outlying areas are ISO 7 to 9 because of distances to water and stations.

Seneca city is an ISO 4 but hopes for an ISO 3 rating based on water system improvements, new apparatus, more career and volunteer personnel, better training, etc. The lack of a northside station, however, may limit chances for the higher rating. Areas served by Seneca outside the city range from ISO 5-9 depending on location and water supply. Walhalla, Westminster, Fair Play, Friendship, West Union, and Keowee District with hydrants, and in some cases career firefighters, fare better locally with ISO 5-7 rates and adjacent rural areas at ISO 7-9. Expanded waterlines and hydrants along with dry hydrants on the lakes work in our favor across much of the county, but we must demonstrate to inspectors the capacity for continuous water supply on fire grounds in rural areas using tanker/engine/portable tank relays to maintain water flow.

Oconee's last county-wide ISO inspection was 20 years ago. Growing population, shifts in population centers, and more stringent requirements means every

department must run harder to maintain ISO standards or risk losing its current rating.

In preparation for the inspection, the county is using a contractor in addition to the new emergency services department to assess strengths, shortfalls and easiest-to-fix concerns before inspection to ensure the best outcome across the county. Emergency services department cadre personnel focused first efforts on crucial ISO requirements countywide to prioritize actions and plug shortfalls and upgrade protective equipment (turnouts, breathing equipment) critical to volunteers' safety. The most critical need is to supplement response capabilities in distant rural areas with immediate response personnel to shore up mutual aid and relocate some equipment to achieve the ISO five-mile station-to-scene standard wherever possible. Another priority is to develop contingency actions to cover any area where current response and fire protection may be threatened.

Oconee County could double in population, industry and commerce over the next 20 years. The ISO inspection is a "necessary evil" that will identify fire protection priorities. ISO findings along with water and sewer authority plans, Oconee Alliance visions, planning and building codes, and residential and industrial/commercial development will drive fire protection planning. A coherent plan for expansion of existing stations, building new stations, and logical adjustments to response areas are concerns. What new and special equipment must be procured to meet the needs of established areas and new development is another priority. We must get out in front of development before we are over run by demands and costs. We must buy the right stuff at the right time and locate it and manpower wisely to get the most value for our tax buck.

Oconee's fire and rescue services are overwhelmingly volunteer and will remain so for years to come. They are dedicated, better trained, and put in huge numbers of hours that save you tremendously on taxes and insurance. You depend on them daily and you owe them support. Transition to a more coordinated county system is never easy anywhere and Oconee is no exception. Sometimes it gets downright ugly. Everybody has their own version of what is best. Despite growing pains and grouching—some deserved, some self-serving—progress is ongoing. Less noise, more listening, and willingness to compromise by all sides is necessary to get the best balance over time.

Next time thoughts on transition, county funding of a "safety net" for volunteers and why it is so hard to please everybody, everywhere, all the time.

TRANSITION AND CONDITIONS

Transition to a county-based fire/rescue emergency system is difficult, but we must do it now or be overwhelmed by development on the horizon. Oconee's transition is déjà vu all over again for me. I've watched county after county, including where I fought fire, struggle to manage a limited tax base, distribution of assistance, costs, mesh volunteer and career staffs efficiently, and limit dissension. It is never easy.

Most importantly Oconee's emergency response components—fire/rescue, OMC paramedic ambulance service, sheriff's office, communications, and dispatch—must expand as the county grows. We can not stand still or we fall behind and insurance rates rise, property losses increase, and some will die unnecessarily. I'll highlight a couple of issues to show there is always more than one side to a story.

Volunteer and career rescue and fire personnel are action junkies. They do it for the community, but love the adrenalin rush too. As a group they are aggressive, independent, turf conscious, opinionated and outspoken. They're happy when they're running calls and grouse when they don't. Volunteers and city departments see things from their local view and want things their way, but often disagree. County emergency managers take a broader perspective and look to the future. Additionally, Oconeeans hate taxes, but ignore the correlation between their demands for capable emergency services, increasing call rates, spiraling costs, and their taxes. Disagreements are inevitable.

In Oconee, older move-ins, young folks departing for better jobs, industrial/commercial growth, and an aging volunteer force will require added career responders along with apparatus, equipment, and upgraded stations. We may have 150 career fire/rescue responders within 15 years. (We already have 40-50 with Seneca, Wallhalla, Westminster, Keowee, and OMC paramedics, along with the new county staff of 14). Like Oconee, the Virginia County I served in was large, rural, growing, tax limited, culturally divided, and volunteer-based. Almost overnight they were overwhelmed by development. Their first career firefighter group of 15 seventeen years ago now numbers 300 in addition to volunteers.

Oconee's transition to a county-based system accelerated with Seneca's threat to withdraw fire service to its response area outside the city unless they got additional county funding to cover some costs for career personnel. (As a city

resident I applaud the vast improvement in fire response, but I will never support withdrawal of service.) The county was forced to make rapid changes in its funding to Seneca and other departments, and reorganize and expand emergency response capabilities by hiring career cadre to fill potential gaps and manage transition.

At the outset, no new system is perfect, entirely fair, nor is there an instant-on switch. Everybody has a different idea of what to do and how to do it. So you plug obvious holes, play catch-up and try to set priorities. Volunteers are great, but they aren't the best records keepers. Accountability differs from station to station. We're not sure how many volunteers actively respond to calls because some are station hands and many are members of multiple fire and rescue stations. The Seneca/County face-off still simmers with the contract set to expire next year. So the County must keep contingency plans. And, some volunteers are never satisfied if they don't get their way. They're the ones you see in "Willie" — sometimes they have a point and sometimes not.

One area of disagreement is how to use the county career cadre — whether to work them as a unit or parcel them out one to a station. The latter would help some stations and give the appearance of a more even distribution of county assistance, but in slow stations the career person would be idle to the point of being more janitor/clerk than responder.

In the short run I think it's better to work the cadre as a unit until the next hiring cycle — that is walk before you run. Contingencies for the Seneca area is one point. Welding the new staff as a functioning unit to assess current and future shortfalls is another. A major emergency that requires longterm response beyond the capability of employed volunteers figures in too. Immediate support response for our most rural areas also is important.

I am no great fan of the county truck and crew responding through others' turf except as necessary, but better dispatch SOP's could limit that. Lastly, many of our outlying areas are getting needed assistance not only with immediate added response, but also the rotating county crew adds training and maintenance help for those stations.

The key is to let things shake out and work on our most pressing problems first, then reassess how to deploy additional staff as it becomes available. Next time, thoughts on distribution of county assistance/funding to fire and rescue volunteers.

Keeping You and Yours Safe is not Easy, Cheap, or Simple

Funding Oconee fire and rescue services is big business. It's a complicated technical business that runs just over two million dollars a year. Operational costs; required expertise; meeting NFPA, ISO, NIMS, and federal standards; and planning for where, what and when are near over-whelming. We are far beyond my era when neighbors got together, threw fund raisers, put up a building, bought a used truck, and declared ourselves a Fire or Rescue Department.

Today's fire and rescue personnel must focus on their principal mission – response. Increasing call rates, extensive technical training, station duties, and demands of their personal lives weigh heavy. They should not worry where dollars come from to keep their stations going. The county now negotiates stipends with the cities, collects for special tax districts and covers volunteer stations fuel, utilities, safety equipment and most apparatus costs. Volunteers along with County cadre determine what we purchase, operations guidelines, and training to get the job done right.

Every station (volunteer, city, and tax district) is financially better off today than three years ago. Seneca's demands for county funding to run calls outside the city and Seneca's own recognition of its need to make major improvement in apparatus, training and operations turned out a blessing for every Oconee citizen and all emergency services departments.

The County, caught unprepared for Seneca's demands, realized how stressed and underfunded fire and rescue services were. They moved toward a responsible model to ensure Emergency Services stability, develop coherent management, establish a cost share basis across the County and provide accountability for tax funds. A fluke in State Law allows cities a greater millage than can be given to unincorporated areas. This disparity is offset to an extent through County bulk purchase savings and support from County career cadre. The system is not perfect, but it is far better than where we were headed. We must move forward, not backward.

Accounting for Emergency Services stipends to cities and tax districts is done in accordance with state law. Volunteer stations are reimbursed for vouchered fuel, utilities, and some equipment and maintenance costs. The County purchases and distributes apparatus, personal safety equipment,

radios, respiration masks etc. This insures a safety net for smaller stations and that busier stations needs are met.

Here is a sample of what we face. A reinforced chassis class A 1000-1500 GPM pumper without lots of bells and whistles costs \$300,000 to \$400,000, (underbuilt pieces don't meet the demands of response). Capable aerial trucks run \$500,000 to \$1,000,000. Tankers go for \$200,000 to \$300,000. Radios cost \$750 to \$1,200 per unit, and, think what the rise in fuel and utilities cost you. Those costs hit the County too.

The County makes quality-considered purchases through competitive bids. Replacing our nearly 300 aging breathing systems with our highest-rated product costs a bit over \$1,000,000. Part of the contract includes test apparatus and extensive training for our technicians that will save us \$12,000 each year by doing required tests and maintenance in house. Additionally, we instituted a 17-year replacement cycle for apparatus and plan to purchase two major pieces a year. It's a start, but how many of you drive 17-year-old vehicles, let alone depend on them for water while you're in a 1,000 degree fire. (Some jurisdictions use 12-15 year replacement cycles because of maintenance and dependability concerns.)

Our apparatus schedule does not account for additional pumpers or aerials for high rises like Monte Lago, new industry, or large residential developments like Keowee Key. Nor is money guaranteed for expansion or major repairs to existing stations or new stations. One way to offset many costs is to insist on impact fees from developers so tax payers don't get stuck with the bill. Another possibility is for area residents, like Keowee Fire District, to opt for a tax that allows for station construction, apparatus, and career personnel beyond what the county can do. That is up to the voters in such districts.

While the volunteer stations, cities, and special districts are better off financially, their total costs are far from covered. As a retired responder I am outraged that some Oconee residents don't accept their responsibility to bear a fair share for services of common concern let alone financially support volunteer Fire and Rescue responders.

So there you have it. Remember, too, Emergency Services competes with every County office in the annual budget game where there is never enough

money to meet every need. Not everything gets done on schedule or to the complete satisfaction of everyone.

Next time some thoughts on our underappreciated, overworked Rescue Squads and OMC Paramedic Ambulance teams. You will be amazed.

Jay Hetherington, Chair, Emergency Services Commission and longtime volunteer